Mothers of the Saints

- F Drouet, CM

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From the Patriarch Jacob to Cardinal Vaughan, from Saint Basil to Pope Pius X, all great men, all great saints, are practically unanimous in proclaiming the prominent part played by their mothers in the molding of their characters and the shaping of their lives; many a time it has been the pleasant duty of the biographer to record such a declaration as this found in the correspondence of his hero: "To my mother I owe what is best in me."

In the case of the saints, the mother has been usually the docile instrument of supernatural favors, the living channel of grace, and one would be almost tempted to say, the necessary complement of God, His visible shadow, His faithful substitute. Most of the saints, no doubt, could repeat and apply to themselves the words of Saint Gregory the Great, still written on the walls of the Mount Coelius Convent: "It is Sylvia, my saintly mother, who gave me the Church."

Unfortunately, in the annals of Christian motherhood there are many blank pages; and too often, to his deep regret, the historian finds nothing to satisfy his eager curiosity, except the mere mention of a name accompanied with some commonplace eulogy of the vaguest character. And yet, from the heroic mother of the Maccabees to the peasant mother of the Cure of Ars, what a gallery of unique pictures, what a glorious procession of brave women, come from every walk of life!

The first three centuries of Church history are the heroic age of Christian motherhood. For practically three hundred

years, with intervals of unequal duration, the Christian home is under the fire of persecution; every member of the family is a candidate for martyrdom, and the mother is educating her children not for life, but for death. Their little ones breathed freely the heroic atmosphere in which Christian fortitude grew and blossomed naturally. Such fortitude had not failed in the Confessors and Virgins, and it did not fail in the Christian mothers whom we find not more faithful than other witnesses of Christ, but undoubtedly more sublime: for besides delivering themselves to the executioners, they were called upon to deliver their children as well. A sentence, borrowed from the *Acta Martyrum*, throws a flood of heavenly light upon this, the heroic age of Christian motherhood. The Roman magistrate said to the mother: "Sacrifice to the gods or else not only you, but your seven children will be put to the rack." And the Christian mother answered: "Is it possible that I may have the happiness of being eight times a martyr?"

The mother to whom we owe this typical answer was Saint Symphorosa, wife of the noble and charitable Getulius. Heroism was a tradition in the family, for the husband had cheerfully given up his life for his divine Master, and his worthy spouse had buried him with her own hands in the arenarium of their country house, in the land of the Sabines.

The slave mother in those days proved herself the equal of the patrician woman: so true it is that Christianity had lowered all social barriers and raised the hearts of the lowly from the dark pits of misery and vice to the luminous height of Christian perfection, where they felt as much at home as their aristocratic masters. Zeo, a Phrygian female slave, is ordered to sacrifice to the goddess Fortune; her answer is an energetic refusal. "I will have thy children tortured," shouts her master, completely taken back by the resistance of a slave, " and we shall see whether Christ, Whom thou callest

thy God, will be able to save them from my hands." The children are seized, their tender bodies are torn to pieces with iron hooks: "Be of good cheer, my children," says the sublime mother. "fight like men, and be not afraid of torments." Their reply is worthy of her exhortation: "What are these torments, mother. Tell the tyrant to increase our sufferings, that we may obtain a more beautiful crown." The infuriated man casts them together into a roaring furnace. But from the midst of the flames songs burst forth, and with a last prayer on their lips: "O Jesus, receive our souls," the mother and the children united in faith, united in death, fall asleep in the Lord. A few years later, Saint Felicitas and her children recall and imitate the courage of Symphorosa.

Symphorian, who lived at Autun in the time of Marcus Aurelius the Wise, was an accomplished type of the educated Gallo-Roman youth. Having refused to worship Cybela the goddess mother, he was sent to his death. Passing by the city walls, a sudden apparition startles him - his own mother come to bid him a supreme adieu, like Mary meeting her divine Son on the way to Calvary. "My son, Symphorian my son," she cried, "my son, think of the living God! Keep your heart on high, look towards Him Who reigns in heaven! They are not going to take away your life; you are going to exchange it for a better one."

From Gaul we pass to distant Palestine, and the same spectacle of supreme fortitude greets our eyes once more: a mother is carrying to the place of martyrdom a child who has thrown his little arms around her neck. The child is smiling, the mother is grave and silent. When they have reached it, the executioner demands his victim, and after a last kiss the mother quietly surrenders him. "Go, my son," says she, "go where God is calling you; until now I have called you my son; hereafter I will call you my lord." Then, spreading her

veil on the ground, she receives reverently the precious blood of the little martyr.

With the fourth century a new era opens for the Church of Christ. The Edict of Milan grants her official recognition and protection. The age of martyrs is closed; souls have come down from the heights of Calvary, where they dwelt in an atmosphere of supernatural heroism, in perpetual expectation of martyrdom. Their piety lays aside these sublime features we have wondered at in Symphorosa, Zoe, and Felicitas, and assumes the more human character of a devotion nearer to the earth, yet keeping, of course, in constant touch with heaven. The Christian mothers of the fourth century were the great, extraordinary women to whom Libanius paid this well-known tribute of admiration: "What wonderful women among those Christians!" The mother who drew that eulogy from the lips of a pagan professor was Anthusa, mother of the great bishop with the golden tongue, Saint John Chrysostom.

God utilized the great affection of John Chrysostom's mother to keep on the Catholic battlefield of the fourth century one of the most powerful leaders of the Church militant. For it was Anthusa's tender and intense maternal love which prevented her son from retiring into the desert. The four years John spent in the mountainous region near Antioch, and the two years in a cave, in the practice of most austere asceticism, were after the death of her whose entreaties he had not dared disobey. She was the wife of Secundus, commander of all the cavalry forces of the Eastern Empire. A widow at the age of twenty, she refused to marry again, in order to devote her undivided attention to the education of her two children, a daughter, whose name is unknown, and John, who, she felt, needed all the care she could bestow.

In compliance with a deplorable custom, against which he inveighed when he became a bishop, John was not baptized until the twenty-fifth year of his age. There is nothing in his life to warrant the assumption that, like Saint Augustine, like the prodigal son of old, he wandered into a far away country, where he wasted his substance living riotously, and whence he had to be brought back by the burning tears of another Monica. But there is no doubt that Anthusa witnessed with some concern the brilliant achievements of her unbaptized son among the high pagan society of a city like Antioch. Time and again she asked herself whether her son, who was the favorite pupil of Libanius, would have the moral courage to break through the net skillfully woven around him by his well meaning pagan admirers. So, we may imagine her relief when, in the year 389, Bishop Meletius finally received him into the Church, and soon made him a lector.

But then from an unexpected quarter, another danger threatened the happiness of Anthusa. She suddenly became aware of her son's project to leave the paternal home in order to emulate the austerities of the solitaries of the Thebaid. The sacrifice was above her strength; she had generously offered her son to the Lord, she was willing and even anxious to see him become a priest; but a monk, far away from her, perhaps lost to her forever, the mere thought of it drew tears of blood from her heart. And this is why we are called upon to witness one of the most intensely human episodes in the lives of the saints, one that lays bare before us, in all their admirable sincerity, two great hearts worthy of each other and worthy of God. Let Chrysostom tell us himself.

Our project [he says, speaking of the little plot he had secretly devised with his friend Basil], our project was about to succeed, when the entreaties of my mother set it at naught for the present. Having suspected our plan she took

me one day by the hand, led me into her own apartment, and bidding me sit down near the bed where she brought me into this world, she began to cry bitterly. And then with heavy sobs, she said to me things still more touching than her tears: "My son, I enjoyed only for a short time the help I received from your dear father, his premature death left me a widow and you an orphan. My only consolation in the midst of my many sorrows was to have you constantly by my side, and to behold in you the unforgotten features of your father. O my son, would you have the heart to leave me a widow for the second time? The only favor I now beg from you is not to revive my grief: wait at least for my death, perhaps, it is not far distant."

John yielded to her tears, and we thank and bless him for it. For, perhaps it is because of his filial obedience that we may admire and love, not only John the monk, but John the unique preacher of Antioch, and John the indomitable Patriarch of Constantinople.

In Saint Monica we greet not only the best known of the saintly figures we are sketching, but also the most accomplished type of womanhood that ever graced a home. The wife of a man who for years was brutal and unfaithful, she won him over by her unalterable patience and smiling condescension. The mother of a son who, to use his own words, "was held tight by the chains of lustful desires, buried in the depth of shame, foul, crooked and defiled," she brought him back to health of heart and soul by fourteen years of a struggle without parallel in the annals of Christian motherhood.

Monica's fight began after the death of Patricius her husband. In his eighteenth year Augustine, still unbaptized, had allowed himself to be bound by those chains that were to hold him for so many years, and make him an easy prey

to that incredulity of the mind which so readily follows in the wake of the passions of the flesh. At first Monica's grief was so violent that her life was in danger. Her tears flowed day and night, in public as well as in the secret of her oratory, on her garments, on the bread she ate, on the pavement of the churches where she knelt: blessed and immortal tears which drew from a holy bishop the memorable answer: "Go, my daughter, leave him alone, and simply pray for him; it is impossible that the son of so many tears should perish."

Fully resolved to do violence to heaven and not to give up the fight until she was rewarded by a complete victory, Monica added to her uninterrupted prayers the practice of Christian works. She buried the dead with her own feeble hands, and while paying them the last honors she begged them to obtain from God the resurrection of her own Augustine. She lavished care and tenderness upon little motherless children, receiving them in her own house, feeding them at her own table; she taught their young lips to stammer out the sweet name of Jesus, endeavoring to give new children to God, that God might bring back her lost child to her. In a word she breathed, prayed, worked for one sole object: the salvation of that dearest of all souls.

Yet when occasion demanded she knew how to silence the voice of flesh and blood, to rebuke the wayward son with the sublime anger of outraged faith. Having learned that the unfortunate youth had publicly denied his religion, and was dragging into the eternal abyss the young friends who yielded without resistance to the ascendency of his genius, she refused to tolerate any longer the presence of an apostate in her house. With all the majesty of a mother, insulted in her Catholic belief, which she held dearer than her own son, she drove him out, and forbade him ever to appear before her. Without a word of protest, the culprit bowed down his head and retired to the house of a friend.

Hardly had he passed the threshold when nature, overpowered for a moment, reasserted its rights, and Monica felt her heart literally breaking asunder within her breast. She would have died, but for a dream that the Lord sent her the following night, and in which she received the assurance that her prayers and tears would win the day. But ten long years were still to pass before she could greet the dawn of returning faith in that soul darkened by heresy and sin; ten years of the most thrilling moral struggle the world ever saw; ten years during which she regained ground step by step, wrestling as it were by inches the heart of Augustine from the slavery of his vile passions, and his intelligence from the clutches of the darkest of all heresies. But the various episodes of that conversion, the most eventful, perhaps after that of Saint Paul, are too well known to bear detailed repetition.

The joy of his return was too much for Monica; she had lived for fifteen years under the crushing strain of an unsurpassed sorrow; but she was unable to bear for more than a year the superhuman happiness which filled to overflowing the frail vessel of her maternal heart.

With deep regret we must content ourselves with a passing but admiring glance at such attractive figures as Saint Berswinda, mother of the sweet and deservedly popular Saint Odila, patroness of Alsace; the Countess Heilvige, mother of Pope Saint Leo IX, who so inspired her son with a veritable passion for purity, as to make his soul "as white as a budding lily." Some historians say it was to honor the memory of his perfect mother that Leo IX instituted the Golden Rose, which the Holy Father still blesses on the third Sunday of Lent, and sends to some Catholic woman as a token of particular esteem. We must offer, at least, a passing tribute of praise and admiration to Ermemberga, mother of Saint Anselm, who saved the mind of her child from that

terrible hypochondria which, for a while, threatened with insanity the man destined to be the glorious precursor of Saint Thomas of Aquin.

We are now approaching the close of the eleventh century, where one gigantic figure towers above all the rest. The incomparable Bernard of Clairvaux, as might be expected, owes the precious gift of his soul, after God, to an uncommon mother. Elizabeth or Alix - the early biographers do not seem to agree on her name - is one of the most striking types of womanhood during the iron period of the feudal system. She is not, as Charles d'Hericault says, like Saint Leo's mother, a lady of the borderland, always on the alert like a soldier under arms; she has not, like Saint Louis' mother, a kingdom to govern and to defend; she is not condemned, like Saint Francis de Sales' mother, to hear the roaring waves of heresy breaking against the very walls of her castle; she is the feudal matron, the mulier fortis, quiet and dignified, the revered queen of the miniature world that moves within the ramparts of her husband's manor.

Eleven centuries of Christianity have cast the human soul in a new mould, and, to use Saint Paul's words, "The goodness and kindness of our Saviour" have softened the native rudeness of these much-abused characters of the Middle Ages. The ideal which the Christian mother of that period sets before the eyes of her children is not only stainless honor and a chivalrous spirit, ready to do battle against all miscreants, one against four, four against ten; it is an ideal that dwells in a still higher region, in a region where human feelings are permeated and transformed by the light of eternity, in a region where piety and purity reign supreme. Not only does she prefer to see her son dead rather than dishonored, but she goes so far as to say - and she means it - she would prefer to see him fall dead under her own eyes rather than be defiled by mortal sin. Such was Saint

Bernard's mother. She bore to Tescelin, who, according to tradition, was a lion in battle and a lamb before women, old men, and children, six sons and one daughter. The historians of Saint Bernard usually record with emphasis that she herself nursed all her children; that her instructions and commands were never given in language ungracious or exaggerated, and that she raised her children as though they were destined some day to share the laborious life of the working classes. "She accustomed them so well," says an old chronicler, "to real hard work that they seemed to begin, under her direction, the apprenticeship of the austerities which they practiced in after life."

The result of her lessons may be summed up in a sentence that speaks volumes for the irresistible power of her domestic example: her brother, her husband, her six sons, and last of all her daughter, all embraced the religious state; not, however, without a protracted struggle which, for Bernard himself, nearly ended in defeat. Who saved him from "the bewitching of vanity" to which his brilliant natural qualities would have made him an easy prey? His mother, who appeared to him with a look of sadness that pierced the heart of Bernard and put an end to his hesitations. Her own brother Gaudry was the next to succumb to that supernatural influence that came from beyond the grave; five sons followed in rapid succession; and the last conquest of that strange, invisible apostolate was her only daughter Humbelina, who finally completed the resplendent crown of seven stars which the happy mother wears now in the kingdom of heaven.

Theodora, mother of Saint Thomas of Aquinas, is the type of those exacting mothers who, for a while at least, stand resolutely, like an armed fortress, between God and the vocation of their children. She was undoubtedly a pious and virtuous woman, but the thought that her son, a descendant

of the companions of Charlemagne, a grandson of a counselor of Frederick Barbarossa and of a princess of the House of Suabia, could become a plain monk, wear a coarse scapular, and bury the glory of his name in the obscurity of a convent, such a thought was unbearable to her aristocratic pride.

No sooner had she been informed that Thomas had taken the Dominican habit than she rushed towards Naples, fully resolved to snatch the boy away and to bring him forcibly back to the paternal castle. He outwitted and outran her, however, and took refuge in Saint Sabina Convent in Rome. The relentless mother was close upon the heels of the fugitive, so close, indeed, that this time he had no chance to escape, and was compelled to keep in hiding within the walls of the monastery. Theodora laid siege before the door, and the good Fathers, fearing her influence, finally dispatched their novice to Paris. But the news of his secret departure leaked out, and in the neighborhood of Acquapendente, Thomas and his companions were suddenly surrounded by a troop of armed men, commanded by his own brother Raynald. In vain did the youthful friar indignantly protest. The young monk was imprisoned in the castle of Aquin, where the triumphant Theodora quickly joined him; and falling upon his neck, opened the floodgates of tears that had filled her heart to overflowing during these months of bitter struggle. Thomas was unshaken in his resolution: "Mother," he used to repeat meekly but firmly, "would I love you less for loving God more and more?" For ten years this mother, blinded by a misguided love, endeavored to kill in the soul of her son a vocation which she would most likely have admired and favored in another. Of course there could be no doubt as to the issue of that unequal combat, and the proud Theodora finally laid down her arms and admitted defeat; but, through fear of displeasing her two oldest sons to whom their brother's

vocation was far more distasteful than to herself, she dared not open the doors of Thomas' prison, but contented herself with secretly favoring his flight.

God, no doubt, wanted her to atone, even upon earth, for her long and stubborn opposition to His will. Frederick, angered at the devotedness of the Aquin family to the cause of the Papacy, stormed and razed their castle. Theodora accepted the lesson, bowed her head in humble submission, and ended her life in a spirit of penance in singular contrast with the haughtiness of former years.

To quote Charles d'Hericault again: the thirteenth century was great because it was holy, and God was, so to speak, reflected in Saint Louis more than in any other king. To prepare that century and that king, continues the same writer, God made use of His Church and of a woman. On the tomb of that woman, in the monastery of Montbuisson, the following epitaph has been engraved: "Madame La Royne Blanche, mere de Monsieur Saint Louis." Of all the eulogies bestowed upon her by the admiration and gratitude of centuries, this is the most simple, yet the most complete and the most sublime.

By birth Blanche belongs to Spain, and after Saint Teresa there are few women, if any, of whom Catholic Spain has a right to be more proud. Contemporary chroniclers are at a loss to find expressions sufficiently strong to convey adequately their admiration of her: "She was," they proclaim with touching unison, "all beautiful, all good, all sincere, all wise; truly beloved by God and man; the most prudent woman of her age; one of the greatest gifts that France ever received from heaven." Capable of bringing to a successful close the most difficult undertakings, she held sway over the supreme council of kings, and her persuasive eloquence knew the secret of overcoming all opposition; her husband

unreservedly submitted to her will; which, another historian maliciously remarks, would have been going too far, were love not such a good and plausible excuse. Grace, energy, courage, these three words give us a complete portrait of Blanche's character. Her greatest title to the admiration of posterity is, of course, that she gave to the world Saint Louis, the perfect type of a Christian king.

Blanche was an educator without a peer; development of the body, culture of the mind, preservation of the soul - every phase of this threefold education was under her personal supervision - nothing was neglected that could help make a man and a Christian of him who was destined to rule a great kingdom. Monks and knights were his teachers; at the school of the former he learned to read and chant the canonical office, and to pore over the pages of the Bible and of the Fathers; from the latter, with equal ardor and undiminished vigor (for this pious youth felt the good red blood of France and Spain tingling in his veins), he learned to mount a horse; to hunt and fish in the royal forests; to jump ditches; to scale high walls, and to brave the inclemency of the weather. And at every stage of this sane and virile formation, the influence of the mother made itself deeply felt; "she accustomed him to hard work and did not even hesitate to inflict upon him the punishments then in use."

But, of course, the preservation of Louis' soul from all impure contact was uppermost in Blanche's preoccupations, in her cares, in her prayers: "Fair son," she said to him more than once, "I would fain see you dead rather than defiled by a mortal sin."

With such an education to tide them over the manifold dangers of their exalted position, it is not difficult to understand how two of Blanche's children, namely, Louis

and his sister Isabelle, found their way to the honors of canonization. But here a question naturally arises to our lips: how is it that such a model mother did not precede or follow her children to this honor? Alas, that we must put our finger upon a flaw, in that magnanimous heart; to complete this sketch, brief though it be, we must speak of Queen Blanche's relations with her daughter-in-law, Marguerite of Provence.

On the day of their marriage, the young king slipped on his wife's finger a golden ring representing lilies and daisies ("Marguerites" in French), delicately entwined, with this significant motto engraved on the edge: "Dieu, France et Marguerite: hors cet anel poing n'ey d'amour - God, France, and Marguerite: beyond this ring I have no love." Did Blanche imagine she was thereby exeluded from her son's heart? At any rate from that day the young couple knew from bitter experience how far and how fast a jealous mother can travel along the lines of indiscretion, unreasonable complaint, petty annoyance, and undignified anger.

In spite of this one strange weakness, Louis' respect and love for his mother remained unaltered to the end. To judge of their true sentiments, we must read the touching scene of their last parting, when the king was about to embark for Egypt: "Dearest son," cried out the disconsolate mother, "how could my heart endure such a separation; it would be harder than a stone if it were not even now rent asunder, for you are the most loving son a mother ever had!" She nearly fainted away, and leaning upon the king who was himself bathed in tears, she sobbed aloud: "Fair son, never shall I see you again; my heart tells me so, never shall I see you again." Her presentment did not deceive her; she died before he returned. When the news of her blessed death reached him, the saintly king gave full vent to his grief, and kneeling down poured out his heart in this beautiful prayer:

"Lord God, I give you thanks for 'lending me' my dear mother so long. It is true, O sweet Father of Jesus Christ, that I loved my mother above any creature in this perishable world, and indeed she deserved it; but, since it was your Holy Will that she should die, blessed be your Holy Name!"

Who has said that the saints, if they wish to be consistent, must stifle in their heart all tender feelings, trample human affections under foot, and let the love of God absorb and utterly destroy all other sentiments? Those who still profess to believe that absurd and stubborn calumny have probably never heard of Saint John Chrysostom nor of Saint Louis, and perhaps they have still to be taught the names of Saint Vincent de Paul and of Saint Francis de Sales. At any rate they are not aware that no less than three volumes have been written under the alluring title: "The natural affections of the saints."

In bringing to a close this very incomplete and very imperfect review of saintly portraits, the writer cannot resist the pleasure of quoting once more the admirable historian and gifted orator to whom he owes so much, Father L. Raimbault: "There is nothing more beautiful than a mother, because there is nothing that resembles God so closely: 'Mater Deus,' Saint Augustine says, 'quia fovet, quia sustinet, etiam quia calcat.'" Mothers are the queens of life, being raised to the dignity of coworkers with the Author of Life.

They are the queens of education; soldiers protect the national flag, bankers guard the public wealth, but mothers have been intrusted with the most precious treasure of this world, after the Blessed Eucharist: the souls of the children. They are the queens of sacrifice; the Bible, the history of the Church militant, are replete with records of how their tears were copiously shed, how their blood was generously given.

Everywhere in the history of souls and in the history of nations, they assume the suppliant attitude of victims, and more than once they appear, in the light of supernatural glory, in the triumphant attitude of saviours.

About This eBook

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